

# Duxbury's early settlers: John Washburn

*This is the second part, continued from Sept. 14, of a story detailing the land grant and the attached history of John Washburn.*

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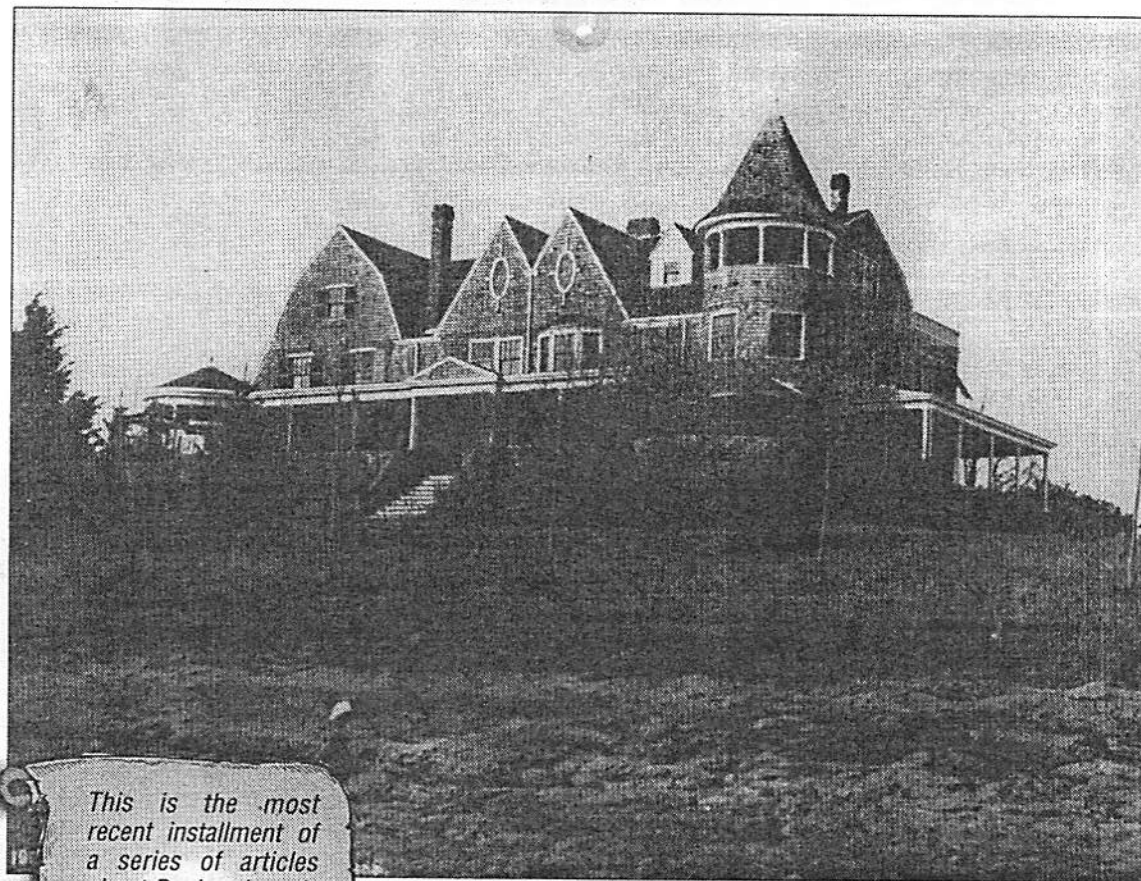
When the Rev. Ralph died he had accumulated over 150 acres in different areas of town. The bulk of his property was left to his daughter, Elizabeth, his only daughter to come to New England. Elizabeth deeded some of the property to George Partridge, possibly her uncle, but at least a cousin. The



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Partridges who later owned the farm and the Stearns and Richardsons were descendants of George Partridge. Elizabeth's descendants were Kemps and Thachers. Ralph Thacher, Elizabeth's son, inherited the Partridge Farm, but he left to preach in Chilmark, on Martha's Vineyard and it went into the George Partridge side of the family.

The Partridge Farm was divided into several smaller parcels owned by different owners, but the largest tract was owned by George Partridge and he operated the farm successfully. The property passed through his family for several generations. George Partridge's great-grandson, sometimes referred to as the Honorable George Partridge (1740-1828) inherited the farm and was probably Duxbury's most famous Revolutionary patriot. When the Duxbury selectmen received a letter from Boston in 1773 seeking support from the cities and towns in their ongoing dispute with the British authorities, they appointed a committee to respond. The written response most likely fell to George Partridge, the most highly educated member of the committee. Probably written in the parlor of the Partridge Farm house, the letter was so highly regarded by the Patriot leaders that they included George in the councils of the colonies. For the next 10 to 15 years George dedicated his life to the service of his country.



*This is the most recent installment of a series of articles about Duxbury's early settlers, using land records and other historical documents.*

Fanny Davenport's house c. 1893. Photo courtesy of the Duxbury Rural and Historical Society.

George served with Col. Cotton in the Plymouth Company as Captain of the Duxbury Minutemen in 1773. He marched with that company to fight the British under Captain Balfour in Marshfield. That episode resulted in no bloodshed when the British escaped by sea. He was a representative to the General Court in Boston in 1774. He often traveled to Philadelphia and New York as a delegate to Congress under the old Confederation and later

to the Continental Congress. He was a great admirer of George Washington and was present when George Washington gave up his commission. It's quite possible that he was responsible for renaming Washington Street, where it had been previously called Commercial Street and Main Street.

After the Revolution, George returned to Duxbury, served in the legislature and was sheriff of Plymouth County, a full-time job. He still found time to be active in town affairs. He was actively involved in church business, his many business interests, the farm, and his sheriff's work. Sometime in the 1790s, Rebecca Frazar, sister of his friend Samuel Frazar, came to the Partridge Farm to work for George. She was much more than a housekeeper, actually a secretary and in a very real sense a business associate. She was the social equal of all who came to the house, a highly unusual situation for that era. Many times her name appeared on legal documents in her own bold signature, Rebecca Frazar, Jr.

George Partridge's house was where the best minds of Duxbury gathered whether for good conversation or more serious matters. A meeting at his house in 1821 was described in a letter that Sarah Bradford Ripley, wife of the Rev. Ezra Ripley of Waltham and daughter of Capt. Gamaliel Bradford, wrote to her brother Daniel. "Last week father and I took a trip to Duxbury. We spent the day going the rounds and took tea at Mr. Partridge's. In his small parlor was collected more good sense and soul than would save all Waltham, to wit: Mr. Partridge, Dr. Allyn, Mr. Frazar, Uncle Gershom, and father."

When George Partridge was 83 in 1823 he wrote his will, leaving \$10,000 to the town for support of the minister of the First Parish Church; \$9,000 to Rebecca Frazar and one half the dwelling house so long as she shall continue to live in it and make it her home; the dwelling house in which he now lives to Zadock Bradford; \$2,000 to Harvard University; \$10,000 to several individuals in trust for the establishment of a school or academy in the town of Duxbury (a legacy that, to this day, still benefits the town); and finally "my homestead farm on which I now live and all my other Real Estate to my kinsman George P. Richardson." The bequest to Rebecca was most likely discussed between her and George Partridge, for soon after his death she bought a house and opened a private school in the home's ell.

The Honorable George Partridge died on July 7, 1828;

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Benjamin Kent presided at the funeral service and gave a sermon that has been often quoted. To me, truly the end of a great man and patriot.

After George P. (Partridge) Richardson (1875) re-acquired most of the Partridge Farm it fell to Parker C. Richardson. The waterfront portion of the property was left by Dura Wadsworth to his two sons Henry Wadsworth (surveyor) and Gamaliel Wadsworth. Gamaliel sold to George P. Richardson in 1864, then later the property fell to Parker C. Richardson. He sold to Fanny Davenport MacDowell in 1893.

### The Davenports

Many people and families in Duxbury have attained success in all types of endeavors. The Duxbury family that has been most successful in the entertainment industry is the Davenports, Seymours and Fields. In spite of their national and international success, they still found time to

perform in Duxbury for their own enjoyment and to help worthwhile causes.

Edward Loomis Davenport (1816-1877) was a famed stage performer from a long line of actors in Great Britain. He married Fanny Vining, an actress who was a descendant of Jack Johnson, an 18th century Irish stage actor. From this union came five daughters and two sons, all of whom were active in the entertainment industry. The couple's eldest daughter, Fanny Davenport, became famous on the stage throughout the country from the 1870s until the late 1800s. A little insight into Fanny's sense of humor is in a poem found in her scrapbook:

"What wine?" the waiter cried.

"Here's sherry, Chablis and champagne!"

-said Hall aside, "The man must be insane"

"shall he of me make sport?"

"My name is Daven -  
PORT"

Fanny first married Ed-

win F. Price (1879) and later married W. Melbourne MacDowell. She and W. Melbourne built Melbourne Hall on Washington Street across from her sister May Davenport Seymour's house, Clamavi Towers. May's house is now 148 Washington Street where James B. and Mary E. Lampert currently live. Melbourne Hall was built shortly after 1893 as Fanny's summer retreat and was a magnificent structure. Sadly, she only lived there for three years before her untimely death in 1898 at age 48. Stories abound of the local gentry trying to get a glimpse of her while bathing or in her sailboat, Fanny D. Parts of the original structure have been removed, but some of it remains and it is the home of Jacqueline B. Hutchinson.

W. Melbourne MacDowell was at one time commodore of the Duxbury Yacht Club and a successful sailor, winning several racing events. We know little of his relationship with Fanny, but after her death, he led a checkered life.

He married, at least twice more, Fanny having been his second wife. His third wife had him arrested and sued for divorce, claiming cruelty on the honeymoon, abuse, drunkenness, philandering, etc. She won the divorce and the decree "forbade the actor (W. Melbourne) from marrying again during the lifetime of the plaintiff," but she "is permitted to remarry." This happened in 1900, and in 1904, breaking the divorce agreement, he married again, this time a young stage-struck girl named Bertha Woodin. W. Melbourne had a long career in both silent movies (17 years) and on stage, although many of his appearances were met with less than rave reviews. To me, that makes him a bad actor both on and off stage.

Fanny's sister Lillian, the next in line, acted under the stage name Lillian Vining (her mother's maiden name). She married Frost Thorn, Jr. who drowned in a boating accident in 1876, leaving Lillian with a daughter, Marcellite, and a son, Frost Thorn, III. Even though Junior's parents were wealthy, they seemed not to be supportive of Lillian and their grandchildren. Accusations of Mr. Thorn being pressured into the marriage caused Lillian's father to publicly, in a Boston paper, defend his daughter. In any event, after Lillian died, her sister Fanny adopted the two children in 1888, when Marcellite was 14 and Frost was 13. Since Fanny lived until 1898 they would have reached adulthood in her care.

Of the Davenports, Blanche may have been the most famous to the rest of the world. She appeared in operas throughout Europe, primarily in France and Italy. Her stage name was Bianca La Blanche. A theater in Milan was named after her, and an opera was written for her. She was compared to the great Sarah Bernhardt and many people thought they were rivals, but Bernhardt never took singing

roles and Blanche never took anything else. She sang Marguerite in Faust 1,600 times. Mignon and Carmen were two of her favorite roles. She ended her career in 1895 when she was about 42 to care for her ailing mother, an example of the dutiful daughter that she was. Blanche died in 1921, at the age of 68. She never married and had no children.

May Davenport, of Clamavi Towers, also an actress, lived most of her life in Duxbury married to William Seymour, an actor and theatrical manager. This was another merger of two acting families. William's mother and father were successful actors. I'll cover the Seymour-Field family in Part 3. William and May are buried in Mayflower Cemetery, and their gravestone has the inscription, "married Jan. 8, 1882 and never parted."

The youngest Davenport sister, Florence, was an actress as well. She married Harold Tears (Tiers) and they had a daughter Florence "Pinkie" who was also an actress.

Edgar Davenport, the first of Edward and Fanny Davenport's two sons, worked for the Edison Phonograph Co. producing elocution records.





Fanny Davenport was the descendant of an Irish stage actor.



Harry Davenport as Dr. Meade in "Gone With The Wind."

Last, but by no means least, Edward and Fanny's youngest son, Harold "Harry" was an actor in, or director or producer of 159 plays and movies. He most famously played the doctor in "Gone With The Wind." Some of his other screen credits were "The Life of Emile Zola," "The Hunchback of Notre Dame," "You Can't Take It With You," "Kings Row," "The Ox-Bow Incident," "Meet Me In St. Louis" and many others. Although mostly remembered as a character actor, Harry played several leading man roles as well. Harry's daughter by his first marriage, Dorothy, also an actress, married silent film idol Wallace Reid, Jr. Mr. Reid was a popular and beloved man, but after an accident, he became addicted to morphine and alcohol and

died at the age of 31. One of their children, Wallace, Jr. was active in movie animation.

Harry's second marriage was to Phyllis Rankin, who was a sister-in-law of Lionel Barrymore. They had four children Arthur, Ned, Ann (Fanny) and Kate, all of whom were actors and actresses. His son Arthur used Rankin as a stage name and in turn, Arthur's son Arthur Rankin, Jr. was the founder of Rankin/Bass animation studio, which produced the movies "Santa Claus is Coming to Town" and "Frosty the Snowman," later to become perennial TV favorites.

Ned worked in the film industry in a behind-the-scenes capacity. He was a WWII veteran who served in the Philippines. He survived the war and died in Los Angeles, Calif., near his children.

Harry's daughter from his second marriage, Kate, married Richard Summers, but by the time their son was born (1931) they were divorced. Their son, "Dirk" Drew Davenport Wayne Summers, was an actor, writer, producer or director in 43 movies. Dirk

Van Johnson, June Allyson's favorite on-screen partner. For those too young to remember, June was a big movie star in the 40s and 50s. This resemblance to Van Johnson, somebody June idolized, must have caused an instantaneous attraction when they met on a movie set. June was 31 and Dirk was 17! They were companions from 1962 until 1975. Dirk was named legal guardian of June's two children, Dick Powell, Jr. and Pamela Powell, when June was suffering from alcoholism. The children were from June's marriage to Dick Powell (he of The Thin Man fame). Dirk's most recognized works, as a writer, were "Kojak," "Ironside," and "Mod-Squad." He became an ordained minister in 1969.